

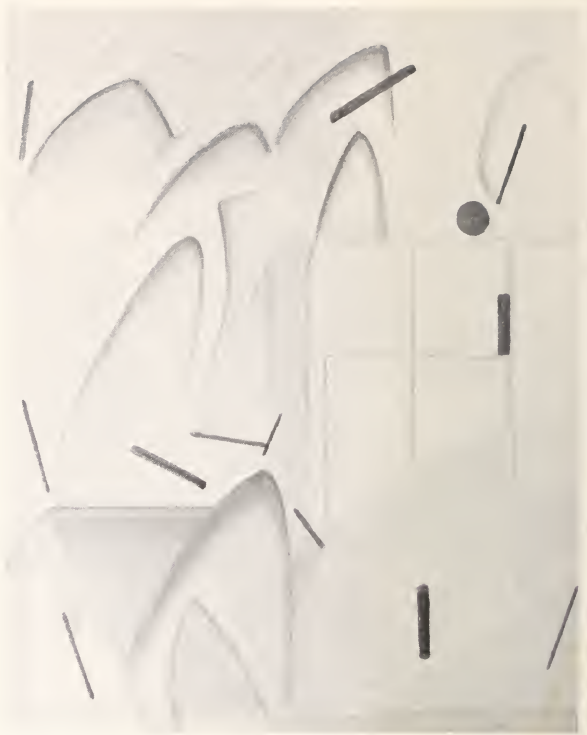
MANIERRE DAWSON

Early Abstractionist



Whitney Museum of American Art

July 8–September 11, 1988



Manierre Dawson (1887–1969) should be considered the first American and perhaps one of the first artists anywhere to paint in a non-objective style. He produced his abstract triptych *Prognostic* in Chicago in early 1910—the same year that Wassily Kandinsky, working in Munich, began his famous abstract series of *Improvisations*. Clearly Dawson could not have known Kandinsky's paintings, even in reproduction.

Despite his remarkable vanguard vision and the early positive responses to his work from such artists as Arthur Davies and Albert Pinkham Ryder, Dawson effectively gave up art after 1914. Today he remains largely unknown, and we have so little information about his brief career and biography that it is hard to speculate how his work became so advanced, or why he abandoned such promising

time. But Dawson, who was about to leave Holabird and Roche, stalled, finally deciding not to submit a work. However, his painting *Wharf* (1913) was exhibited in the Chicago version of the show, in March of 1914. The painting was selected and titled by organizer Walter Pach, who saw in it realistic elements that Dawson claimed were not there; Dawson in fact claimed that *Wharf* was the only non-objective work in the American room. Yet, at Dawson's request, it was not officially registered in the exhibition; it was hung, without his name, after the opening.

Some critics have argued that this anonymous hanging of *Wharf* kept Dawson from being included in the historical list of American modernists. His work was again appreciated, however, in 1914, when it was included in a traveling New York exhibition, "14," curated by Davies. At that time, the important Chicago collector Arthur Eddy purchased two of his paintings.

It was at this point—just as he was starting to achieve recognition—that the inexplicable happened: Dawson accepted money from his father to help him purchase a cherry orchard in the small town of Ludington, Michigan, where his family owned a farm. In December 1914, he resettled there; several months later, he married Lili Boucher, whom he claimed disliked big-city living. With this move to the farm, Dawson disappeared from the art world. He had only just turned twenty-seven. Though he lived for another half-century, he would never paint as experimentally—or as prolifically—again.

Dawson's earliest works are still lifes whose linear character shows the influence of Art Nouveau and Japanese decorative aesthetics. When he began to experiment with abstraction, it was, like Kandinsky and Mondrian, primarily through landscapes. *Beechwood* (1909) reduces the representation of a small wooded area to its underlying structural components and colors. The horizontal band across the center, representing the forest's depths, is interrupted by the repetitious verticality of the tree trunks. These verticals also divide the grassy foreground knoll and the foliage of the trees in the upper half of the painting. The conventional representation of treetops has been reduced to a pattern of linear elements.

As his work evolved from landscape to abstraction, Dawson began dissolving perspective and exploring non-objective forms, often composing within a grid system. *Differential* (1910) and *Differential Complex* (1910) are, however, still based on landscape.



Manierre Dawson (1887–1969) should be considered the first American and perhaps one of the first artists anywhere to paint in a non-objective style. He produced his abstract triptych *Prognostic* in Chicago in early 1910—the same year that Wassily Kandinsky, working in Munich, began his famous abstract series of *Improvisations*. Clearly Dawson could not have known Kandinsky's paintings, even in reproduction.

Despite his remarkable vanguard vision and the early positive responses to his work from such artists as Arthur Davies and Albert Pinkham Ryder, Dawson effectively gave up art after 1914. Today he remains largely unknown, and we have so little information about his brief career and biography that it is hard to speculate how his work became so advanced, or why he abandoned such promising



Prognostic, 1910 (3 panels)

beginnings. Though we may never understand his personal motivations, enough of his art survives to earn him a place among the most innovative American artists of this century.

Born into a cultured middle-class Chicago family, Dawson was an essentially self-taught artist. His father, a lawyer, disapproved of his artistic ambitions, convincing Manierre to take up the more practical profession of architecture. In 1909 he graduated in civil engineering from the Armour Institute of Technology (now the Illinois Institute of Technology). He then began working, first as an engineer, then as an architectural draftsman, for the prestigious Chicago firm of Holabird and Roche.

During these early years, Dawson began to experiment with painting. In the summer of 1910, he left Chicago for a five-month

time. But Dawson, who was about to leave Holabird and Roche, stalled, finally deciding not to submit a work. However, his painting *Wharf* (1913) was exhibited in the Chicago version of the show, in March of 1914. The painting was selected and titled by organizer Walter Pach, who saw in it realistic elements that Dawson claimed were not there; Dawson in fact claimed that *Wharf* was the only non-objective work in the American room. Yet, at Dawson's request, it was not officially registered in the exhibition; it was hung, without his name, after the opening.

Some critics have argued that this anonymous hanging of *Wharf* kept Dawson from being included in the historical list of American modernists. His work was again appreciated, however, in 1914, when it was included in a traveling New York exhibition, "14," curated by Davies. At that time, the important Chicago collector Arthur Eddy purchased two of his paintings.

It was at this point—just as he was starting to achieve recognition—that the inexplicable happened: Dawson accepted money from his father to help him purchase a cherry orchard in the small town of Ludington, Michigan, where his family owned a farm. In December 1914, he resettled there; several months later, he married Lili Boucher, whom he claimed disliked big-city living. With this move to the farm, Dawson disappeared from the art world. He had only just turned twenty-seven. Though he lived for another half-century, he would never paint as experimentally—or as prolifically—again.

Dawson's earliest works are still lifes whose linear character shows the influence of Art Nouveau and Japanese decorative aesthetics. When he began to experiment with abstraction, it was, like Kandinsky and Mondrian, primarily through landscapes. *Beechwood* (1909) reduces the representation of a small wooded area to its underlying structural components and colors. The horizontal band across the center, representing the forest's depths, is interrupted by the repetitious verticality of the tree trunks. These verticals also divide the grassy foreground knoll and the foliage of the trees in the upper half of the painting. The conventional representation of treetops has been reduced to a pattern of linear elements.

As his work evolved from landscape to abstraction, Dawson began dissolving perspective and exploring non-objective forms, often composing within a grid system. *Differential* (1910) and *Differential Complex* (1910) are, however, still based on landscape.

Each uses foreground elements to set off near from far, much like the illusory space of a theatrical setting. Hence, organic forms emerge to suggest large rocks. In *Differential Complex*, Dawson painted in a border whose dark colors contrast with the interior forms and light—somewhat like stage drops and curtains. Within and through the oval, rocklike forms are painted lines, some crossing, some parallel to others, and some randomly placed.

Dawson deployed this original conjunction of the geometric and the organic in the triptych *Prognostic* (1910), the largest and most adventurous work he had attempted to date. Derived from the two earlier *Differential* paintings, the triptych sets organic forms within an abstracted architectural framework. In the center panel, foreground shapes and arcs contrast with a background of Cubist scaffolding that resembles the vertical grid of a city—perhaps Chicago. Once again Dawson fuses geometric and biomorphic shapes. In the flanking panels, arcs lean toward the center, complementing and easing the rigidity of the underlying grid. The grid in turn structures and supports the organic forms and arcs, creating depth and a sense of landscape. However, Dawson's color here is becoming non-associative, chosen for visual effect rather than for naturalistic accuracy.

Prognostic exemplifies that search for a new spiritual freedom so evident in early modernist painting. In a statement for the exhibition catalogue *The Modern Spirit* at the Milwaukee Art Society (1914), Dawson asserted: "Certain features of modern painting and sculpture are the result of gradual and continuous evolution. There is a growing conviction, conscious or unconscious, that to reach the emotion most completely through the eyes one must present the aesthetic optics of a thought or appearance rather than its mere physical form."

XDX (1910) and *Coordinate Escape* (1910) go further in their rejection of traditional perspective and representation. Both paintings are subdivided into rectangular sections whose dividing lines mark out a reduced grid. Within the light-filled rectangles float calligraphic arabesques and organic forms. Autonomous and airy, these motifs are free of any conventional reference to the material world. In *XDX* and *Coordinate Escape*, his last paintings before leaving for Europe, Dawson achieved a non-objectivity based on an inner or spiritual realm.

After his European tour, Dawson abandoned this radical non-objectivity and worked to assimilate the Old Masters as well as the

new avant-garde. His 1911–12 paintings are Cubo-Futurist “transliterations” of Old Master themes. As Mary Mathews Gedo has suggested, *Birth of Venus* (1912) is derived from Peter Paul Rubens’ *Feast of Venus* (1630–37). Dawson’s seascape is presented in traditional perspective, but his Venus is fractured into shimmering jagged planes, the forms highly agitated and dynamic.

During the next two years, Dawson experimented with a variety of avant-garde styles—with mixed results. Among the best works is the oil on cardboard *Equation* (1914), an original Cubist painting of large, overlapping opaque surfaces, resembling the decorative and simplified aesthetic of stained-glass windows. *Letters and Numbers* (1914) sets enigmatic letters and numbers in an architectonic space. The stripped-down symbols may have a mathematical or engineering reference, or they may have a solely formal function.

The term “prognostic,” which Dawson used as a title for his ambitious early triptych, means prediction or foreknowledge. Although the impact of his work was compromised by his relative obscurity and willed isolation, Dawson was indeed a prophet. The experimental nature of his art and its revolutionary, eclectic style establish him as a pioneer of the modernist movement.

Mark H. Bessire

Mary Jo Peer

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width.

Aspidistra, 1906

Oil on canvas, $17\frac{1}{8} \times 14\frac{1}{4}$
Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

Six Flowers in Vase, 1908

Oil on wood, 14×10
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
David Green

Beechwood, 1909

Oil on masonite, $11\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{5}{8}$
Pinnacle West Capital Corporation,
Phoenix

Coordinate Escape, 1910

Oil on board, $19\frac{1}{8} \times 14\frac{7}{16}$
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
Meyer Potamkin

Differential, 1910

Oil on canvas, 12×16
The Regis Collection, Minneapolis

Differential Complex, 1910

Oil on canvas, 16×12
Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

Prognostic (center), 1910

Oil on canvas, $33\frac{3}{4} \times 35\frac{3}{4}$
Milwaukee Art Museum;
Purchase, Acquisition Fund

Prognostic (left), 1910

Oil on canvas, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 20$
Collection of Dr. Peter Fischer

Prognostic (right), 1910

Oil on canvas, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 20$
Private collection

Still Life, 1910

Oil on wood, 9×14
Collection of Dr. Willem Dieperink

Two Trees Before Bridge, 1910

Oil on wood, 10 × 15

Collection of Dr. and Mrs.

John Gedo

XDX, 1910

Oil on board, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 14 $\frac{7}{16}$

Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

Birth of Venus, 1912

Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 32 $\frac{1}{4}$

Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

Red Mur, 1912

Oil on canvas, 16 × 24

Collection of Mr. and Mrs.

William C. Janss

Venus and Adonis, 1912

Oil on cardboard, 44 × 36

Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

Woman in Brown, 1912

Oil on canvas, 36 × 28

Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,

University of Texas at Austin;

Michener Art Fund

Three Trees at Culvert, 1913

Oil on board, 16 × 24

Collection of Harvey and Françoise

Rambach

Untitled, 1913

Oil on cardboard, 28 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{4}$

Yale University Art Gallery,

New Haven; Gift of Dr. Louis Obie,

Mr. Lefferts Mabie and Mr. Frank J.

McKeown, Jr.

Wharf, 1913

Oil on canvas, 18 × 22

Norton Gallery of Art,

West Palm Beach, Florida

Equation, 1914

Oil on cardboard mounted on
wood, 36 × 27 $\frac{5}{8}$

Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

Equation, 1914

Oil on canvas, 16 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 18 $\frac{1}{8}$

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta,

Purchase with J.J. Haverty funds for

J.J. Haverty Collection

Letters and Numbers, 1914

Oil on canvas, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$

Hirshhorn Museum and

Sculpture Garden,

Smithsonian Institution, Washington,

D.C.; Museum purchase

Optic, 1914

Oil on canvas, 20 × 20 $\frac{1}{8}$

Collection of Tommy and

Gill LiPuma

Tilt, 1915

Oil on cardboard, 23 × 27 $\frac{7}{8}$

Collection of Robert M. Cochran

Equation, 1923

Oil on canvas, 28 × 18

Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans

The exhibition and accompanying publication were organized by Mark H. Bessire and Mary Jo Peer, Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. We thank Dr. Mary Mathews Gedo and Mr. Robert Schoelkopf for their invaluable assistance.

Photographs by Dale R. Laster

(*Prognostic* [left]) and David

Wharton (*Prognostic* [right]).

Design by Bethany Johns

Typesetting by Trufont Typographers

Printing by Graphic Impressions

© 1988 Whitney Museum
of American Art

Front cover: *Woman in Brown*, 1912

This exhibition is sponsored by the Lobby Gallery Associates.



sojourn to Europe. In Italy, John Singer Sargent expressed enthusiasm for his work, and in Paris Dawson was introduced to Gertrude Stein—the first to buy one of his paintings. He would base *Woman in Brown* (1912) on a Picasso portrait of Stein he saw there. Returning from Europe, he stopped briefly in New York, where he met Davies and Ryder. Davies tried to convince Dawson to stay on in New York, where support for his art would have been greater than in Chicago's relatively provincial atmosphere. But he refused, citing high expenses, although he may also have been obeying the same paternal will that had pushed him into architectural engineering.

Davies later invited Dawson to include a painting in the 1913 Armory Show in New York, the landmark exhibition that brought the most innovative European and American art to the public for the first